

SONOMA TRRAINTOWN RAILROAD
20264 Broadway Highway 12
Sonoma
Sonoma County
California

HALS CA-61
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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HALS NO. CA-61

- Location:** 20264 Broadway Hwy 12, Sonoma County, Sonoma, CA 95476
Lat: 38.277539967611396 Long: -122.45936393737793 (Center of Park Fountain, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)
- Significance:** Sonoma TrainTown Railroad is an excellent example of a vernacular landscape designed as a small amusement park and to showcase a scale model railroad.
- History:** In 1958 Mr. Stanley Frank, employed as a printer in Oakland, began constructing the park on a level piece of land that had formerly been a pasture near the small town of Sonoma. He was well known in the model railroad community for his extensive and well-designed O-gauge model railroad in the basement of his Oakland house. According to Robert Bennett, acting superintendent, Mr. Frank was deeply influenced by Japanese garden design and he employed many of the principles common to Japanese gardens to create the sense that the landscape is much larger than its actual size, compressing scenic elements into a small area. Mr. Frank sculpted the flat lot extensively to create hillsides, creeks and ponds on the grounds and he planted the property with many trees, predominantly cedars (*Cedrus deodara*). Over a space of ten years Mr. Frank designed and installed the landscape to include the small town scenes and the structures to house the trains. All of the trains, train cars and trestle bridges were constructed in Mr. Frank's machine shop and were built at one-quarter scale. The park opened to the public in the fall of 1968. Mr. Frank's sons run the operation now, which generally employs twenty-one people. Additional landscaping has been installed since the opening of the park and additional trains have been added. Between 1993 and 2003 six rides were installed.
- Description:** Sonoma TrainTown Railroad is located one mile south of downtown Sonoma and covers 10 acres. It was opened in 1968. There are one and one-quarter miles of track. The main attraction is the train ride, which winds around the lot, crossing from an outer circuit to an inner circuit. The train engine pulls several train cars, which are open on top and fitted with seats.
- The west facing entry is a wood structure made to resemble a simple train station; three antique, restored cabooses form part of the entry. The structure also serves as an office and houses bathrooms. Immediately on entering one is on the concrete, ground-level railroad platform. Across from the platform, behind a landscaped area, is a pond with an aerator-style fountain, behind which is the amusement park area featuring rides. To the north is a small raised ornamental planting bed, behind which is an open wood structure housing an air hockey board. In the northwest corner is a modern carousel created to appear old, although it is predominantly made of plastic. Opposite and slightly south is an open area, simply landscaped with ivy and shrubs, through which a small creek meanders. Two gravel paths and concrete bridges invite the visitor to cross over this area, cross an area of track, and enter the small amusement park area of the grounds. South of the landscaped area is a raised concrete platform, recently added as a new location for the carousel. In the southwest corner is a quarter-scale

roundhouse with several engines and cars, and a storage shed. A short distance east of the amusement park is the petting zoo and the miniature town of Lakeview. The town contains about 20 buildings. The main "road" has typical town buildings, such as a train station, school, church, etc. which can be entered easily by children, and carefully by adults. On the periphery are other model buildings of a smaller scale that cannot be entered. Nearby is a small fort containing a climbing structure.

The entry area, the amusement park area, a petting zoo and the associated miniature town of Lakeview are all accessible to visitors on foot. Much of the park is experienced only during the train ride. The train passes over five steel trestle bridges and through two concrete tunnels. The layout of the tracks cleverly expands ones sense of the size of the grounds by revealing slightly different viewpoints of repeated viewsheds; it is only by paying close attention that riders realize they are travelling over already viewed sections of landscape. Various simple scenes are scattered through the landscape, including creeks, waterfalls, tents, cabins, and towns. Some contain human statues, and other scenes contain animal statues. The use of scale is imaginative and diverse. Various scaled train track signage and signals are placed throughout the landscape.

The designer of the park chose an "old west" atmosphere established by the use of the trains and the style of the buildings, which are generally built in styles common to mid-1800s western settlements. Constructed topographical features, on what would otherwise be a flat lot, reinforce this atmosphere and include hillsides with constructed waterfalls and a large naturalistic pond. Plantings are simple and consist mostly of spruce, redwoods, cedars, scattered shrubs, ivy, and naturally occurring grasses. There are small areas devoted to ornamental and/or seasonal color plants, and one palm tree.

The amusement park area consists of the spinning Chattanooga Choo-Choo-Chairs, a small roller coaster called the Dragon Train Coaster, and a Ferris wheel. Children shorter than 54" can also ride on TrainTown airlines, a spinning airplane ride. The rides are connected by relatively narrow gravel paths that are bordered by fences made of split-rail or of steel and steel mesh. Tickets for the rides are taken in booths made of train sections, and train track signage is often incorporated into the rides. With the carousel, called the Iron Horse Carousel, all the rides have been tied, at least by name, to the dominant train theme.

Benches are located throughout the public use area and are of steel or of pieces of split tree trunks. Some areas of park are accessible via railroad tie steps. Various small-scale bridges for crossing very small creeks occur in the use area; these are of wood, steel, or concrete and generally do not have handrails.

Typical of many children's theme parks, this one has a pronounced home-grown quality. Although the trains are of a consistent scale, other elements are of various scales, styles, and quality. There is a very small souvenir component, and simple snacks are available for purchase.

The layout also seems homegrown appearing to have occurred in a happenstance manner, and may also reflect a time when fewer visitors were expected. The platform for boarding and exiting the train shares the entry and is very crowded on a busy day.

Access to the rides section was not obvious, was circuitous, and not very wide. The rides are placed in a seemingly haphazard manner with minimal circulation area allowed. The scale of the areas is probably comfortable to small children. These cozy dimensions, simple landscape treatments, miniature town and railroads clearly have great appeal for the many children and adults visiting the park.

Owner: Mr. Robert Frank

Sources: Bennett, Robert, acting Superintendent for Sonoma TrainTown Railroad. Telephone interview, July 7, 2010.

Site visit, July 7, 2010.

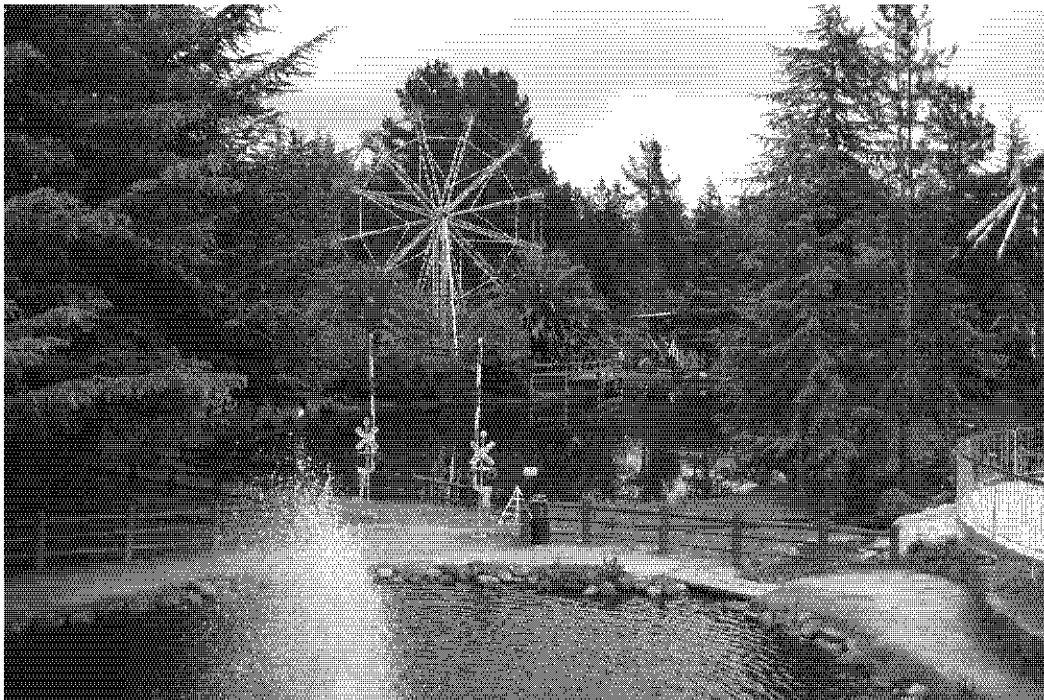
Historian: Janet Gracyk, Landscape Architect, July 7, 2010
Terra Cognita Design and Consulting
145 Keller Street
Petaluma, CA 94952
gracyk707@gmail.com



The entrance to Sonoma TrainTown Railroad (Janet Gracyk, July 7, 2010).



The quarter-scale roundhouse with engines (Janet Gracyk, July 7, 2010).



A view of the pond and a railroad crossing, as seen from an elevated platform above the entrance. The island containing the rides and petting zoo is visible in the distance. (Janet Gracyk, July 7, 2010).



The Sonoma Traintown Railroad caboose (Janet Gracyk, August 2010).



The Sonoma Traintown Railroad Saloon (Janet Gracyk, August 2010).